

# A TILT WITH BALZAC

By  
LOUIS WEADCOCK

Copyright, 1908, by Thomas H. McKee.

At the time that George Hopkins discarded his runabout in favor of a touring-car and had a new roof put on his house, he also laid in a ready-made library. Previous to the installation of this collection of splendid bindings and uncut edges he had been permitted by urbane book agents who wore silk hats and gloves on the street to invest money in limited editions. His wife liked to open these subscription books and look at the numbers.

Hopkins had a vague idea that the lower your number was the more secure was your standing as a booklover, but he was not sure.

And in spite of the nine hundred dollars' worth of the best literature of all ages which he had placed in his library it took a great deal of argument to make him sure that when the Literary and Culture Club elected him to membership the members of that organization were not having fun with him.

"I know all about day-books and ledgers," he said, "and a little about handbooks, but I'll make an affidavit that I don't know enough about the old masters, living or dead, to qualify me as a literary person."

But having been elected, he did the handsome thing. He invited all the gorgeously gowned ladies of the Literary and Culture Club and those husbands who were sufficiently tamed to come with them to his house. He hired the best caterer in town. He bought a case of champagne. He took the newspapers off the library-table, where they hid a fine copy of Somebody's "Visits" to the Homes of Some Other Persons, and he stood by, hot and uncomfortable, for three solid hours while the members took down his books and raved over them.

And he sent the treasurer a check for his dues in advance and gave her the names of a couple of chaps in the hardware business that really needed elevating along ethical and literary lines.

Also he secured important business engagements at the time of the next club meeting and arrived at the house where the club was in session just as the members were putting on their hats and telling one another what a lovely time they had enjoyed.

But they caught George Hopkins at the next meeting. He was not present. His wife made his excuses. She said that he had run in to New York to look at some new importations of books.

He was in New York, it was true, but he was pursuing an arduous course of study at the theatres rather than the libraries or the auction-rooms.

The morning he got back his wife met him at the door of his library.

"You can't guess, George, what has happened while you have been away?" she said gayly.

"The cashier has run away or the typewriter has been married or the car is out of order," said the practical Hopkins.

"You," said his wife, fixing upon him a look of great pride, "you have been chosen as our next lecturer."

"I'll play the piano for you," said Mr. Hopkins, "but I'll not lecture for one thousand dollars a night. I never did such a thing in my life. At my age it's too late to begin. Who started this nominating convention for me, anyway?"

"Mr. Pillsbury suggested it," his wife told him, "and Mr. Haines said he thought it would be perfectly fine. He said that he knew you could tell the members many things they do not know."

"Those two hardware brigands," muttered Mr. Hopkins as he stamped to the door.

"And remember, George," Mrs. Hopkins called to him, "the meeting is on Monday evening."

"They can have it at six o'clock Monday morning if they like," answered Mr. Hopkins. "I'm going to send in my resignation as soon as I get to the store. When I fed that club of yours I did not know that it was going to punish me by insisting upon me making a fool of myself."

On his way down-town he thought seriously upon the futility of trying to clasp culture upon gentlemen in the hardware line. He had to admit that they had evened up matters with him for putting them into the club.

He telephoned to each of them from the store, and each of them refused to believe that he was not elated with the prospect of an opportunity to deliver a lecture. Further, they promised to come and bring some friends.

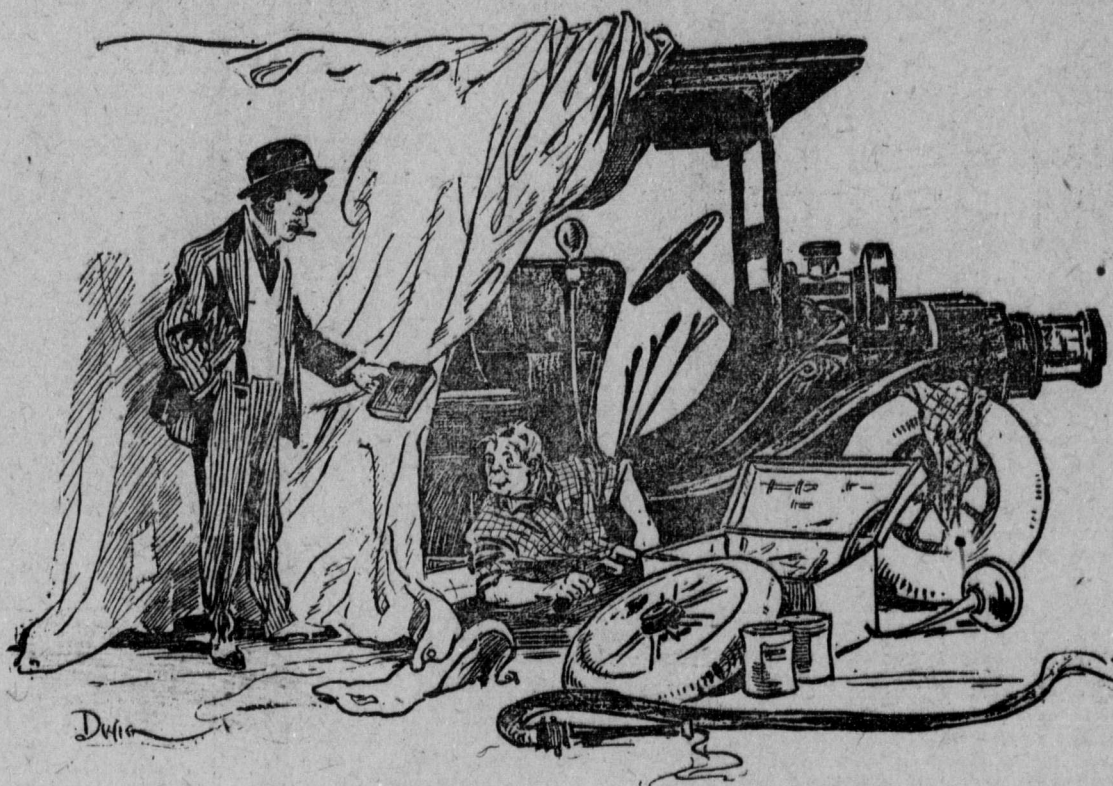
Like a fugitive who awaits the coming of the police did Mr. Hopkins await the coming of Monday. He passed a restless Saturday. He essayed golf, but

played so miserable a game he gave it up in despair. He tried a "bracer" for his nerves, but the "bracer" disagreed with him. Sunday there was rain. One of the auto tires was loose and the roads were too muddy for driving. All of his friends seemed to be out of town. There was nothing in the morning papers. In desperation he took refuge in his library.

"And what a subject!" he groaned to himself every little while. "What a subject! 'The Influence of Balzac upon the latter-day novelists of France.'"

Mr. Hopkins, in regard to French literature, had preserved a blameless plume. Concerning Balzac, his predecessors, contemporaries or successors he had not a solitary idea.

He took down Balzac. The sentences were too long. The names of the characters sounded foolish. He read some of the shorter stories. He liked them.



"MIKE, WHAT WAS BALZAC'S INFLUENCE UPON THE LATTER-DAY NOVELISTS?"

But the man who had selected his books had not put in any of the modern Frenchmen. It was patent that from reading some of Balzac's shorter stories he could hardly be expected to know precisely the effect that Balzac as a whole had upon the latter-day novelists of France whose very names even were unknown to Mr. Hopkins.

He attacked Balzac again, but he stopped when in one of the volumes he came upon a note written by his chauffeur.

France?"

Mike went on polishing the brass-work.

"I suppose," said Mr. Hopkins, "you understood what I said?"

"I don't think it were very good," Mike answered, "judging by what I've heard of them."

"Heard of them?" echoed Mr. Hopkins. "Haven't you—a man who likes reading as well as you—haven't you read them?"

"I'm reading 'David Copperfield,' sir," answered Mike; "there's a feller in there named—"

"How about the tire?" asked Mr. Hopkins, abandoning his literary labors.

After he had discussed the car for a while he said to Mike:

"You write a good clear hand. You know that, I suppose?"

"Thank you, sir," said Mike.

"You make your letters good and big."

"Thank you, sir."

"Anybody can tell which is 'A' and which is 'E' right off the bat."

"I try to make 'em plain, sir."

"How long will it take you to finish that brass-work if I tell you to quit now?"

"I'm just through," said Mike, "and anything I can do to help you I'll be glad to do. I heard the cook

With the first volume under his arm he hurried back to the barn.

"Mike," he said, "there's something in that introduction there I want for reference. Copy it out in ink. Copy all the introduction, and I'll come out and get it after dinner."

Mike went off to his room and started to work. He propped the copy of Balzac against a carriage lamp and wrote with his tongue between his teeth.

Mr. Hopkins walked through his house, humming an air he had heard in a musical comedy in New York.

His cheerfulness coming upon the leaden heels of two days that had been as black as Friday and Saturday puzzled Mrs. Hopkins and pleased her as well.

"George," she said, "I know you'll do well to-morrow evening. I would have offered to help you if I had not thought that you would do the work better alone. Too many cooks, you know—"

Mr. Hopkins meditated upon the fact that so far as he knew there existed no proverb which said that there was such a thing as a superfluity of chauffeurs.

"I won't ask you another word about the lecture," Mrs. Hopkins said; "I know you will have the rough edges smoothed out. Mike said you worked all afternoon in the library."

"What business is it of Mike's?" Mr. Hopkins said tartly. "Mike is getting too officious lately."

"I'll speak to him about it if you say so, George," said Mrs. Hopkins—"or suppose you do it yourself?"

"I will," said Mr. Hopkins, starting up. He found Mike still at work with Balzac propped up in front of him.

"How goes it, Mike, my boy?" asked Mr. Hopkins. "I hope you're making the paragraphs right."

"Right as a trivet, sir," answered Mike proudly. "Do you want to read it, sir?"

"I wouldn't read it for anything in the world," Mr. Hopkins answered from the heart. "It'll be bad enough to have to read it once."

He blotted the last sheet carefully and put the paper in his pocket. Also he took Balzac to the shelf. Then he telephoned to a man down-town and the man came up and they talked business till bedtime.

The Monday mail and getting the week's work under way kept Mr. Hopkins so busy the next day that by the time he got home to dinner he was pretty tired.

"This is positively my last appearance on any stage," he said to his wife at dinner.

She smiled at him across the table.

"Ah, no, George," she said. "When you see how

"He means," said Haines, "how are you going to side-step this lecture thing?"

Mr. Hopkins threw back his head and laughed. "I?" he asked. "I try a dodge like that? Not I. Am I one of these fellows that is tied so fast to the hardware business that he doesn't know Balzac from Hall Caine? Am I a slave to my business? No. I read. I study. I improve my mind. I'm going to deliver a lecture that's a corker. Been working at it for more than a week. Been neglecting my business, in fact. Here's looking at you."

"Pillsbury looked at Haines and Haines looked at Pillsbury for some time before they drank. Then they sighed.

"It's going to be worse than a bull fight," said Pillsbury genially.

"I hope the police don't interfere," said Haines. "A ten-round bout between Hopkins and Balzac. Why, Hop can't even pronounce that name the same way three times in succession."

The two big front rooms were filled. The women outnumbered the men. Yet none of the men seemed to regret that he was there. Hopkins did not lecture on Balzac every evening.

The president of the club, a large lady with eye-glasses and an English accent, opened the meeting.

Mr. Hopkins, freshly shaven and slightly flushed, sat at her side. From the other side of the room Mrs. Hopkins beamed upon him.

He winked at her. Then he remembered that he had never seen any other lecturer wink at his wife or anybody's else wife in public. So he blushed a little more.

He saw that every eye in the room was fixed upon him and he began to wonder if his coat was not getting too tight across the shoulders.

He noticed, too, that one of the electric lights shone more brightly than the others. He wondered why. He compared that electric light with those in the store. He remembered that somebody had said that all 16-candle-power lights are not of the same strength, and as his mind went wandering down a vista illuminated with various sorts of lights he got cold all over and his face began to feel as if it were made of wood. The president had called his name and made a brief speech of introduction.

He stood up and bowed stiffly. Pillsbury and Haines were looking at him with compassion written all over their fat faces. Mr. Hopkins glared back at them.

"... who will now address us upon 'The Influence of Balzac upon the Latter-day French Novelists,'" pounded into his ears, and he grabbed the reading-table with one hand and cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I've written out what I'm going to say, and it isn't very long and I hope you'll enjoy hearing it as well as I did writing it."

And then he read them Mike's copy of the introduction to Balzac.

Even Pillsbury and Haines got interested in it as Mr. Hopkins went along.

As for the real members, they fairly drank in every word.

Mr. Hopkins, warming to his work, regretted that there were only three pages more instead of thirty.

He liked the sensation of being the centre of all the attention. He even ventured to introduce a pathetic tone in his voice once or twice.

Once he stamped his foot and then elevated his hand above his head. He had to keep it there a little longer than he had intended, but he did not bring it down until he could find some appropriate sentiment with which to accompany its descent and produce an effect.

He read slowly, that every word might sink in. And striking the last page and happening to notice that both Pillsbury and Haines were looking at him in open-mouthed admiration, he slackened his pace even more and became even more impressive.

"And," he read, "Balzac represented in his various works both poles of narrative writing. He was at once a romanticist and a realist. A fine steel engraving of Balzac will be found upon page five hundred and twenty-six."

Mr. Hopkins saw the noose in which he had hanged himself as quickly as anybody else. But no quicker.

Pillsbury and Haines broke into unhalloved glee.

Pillsbury dared to ask in a high tone:

"Will the gentleman please repeat his last observation? Those in the back of the room did not hear it."

And out in the hall Mike, who had crept in on tip-toe to witness the triumph of Mr. Hopkins, suddenly remembered that a friend was waiting for him and he went away rapidly.



THE REAL MEMBERS FAIRLY DRANK IN EVERY WORD.

It was dated a month previously, and related to repairs that at that time had seemed essential to the welfare of the car. The note was clearly written. Mr. Hopkins said to himself that he wished he could write a hand like that. Then he remembered that he had always thought his chauffeur a remarkably clever chap. He also remembered that upon occasion he had loaned books to the chauffeur. Then he arose and went out to the barn.

The chauffeur was plodding over the brasswork.

"Mike," said Mr. Hopkins solemnly, "what was Balzac's influence upon the latter-day novelists of

and the maid talking this morning."

"About what?" asked Mr. Hopkins suspiciously.

"About the way the plates are to be laid for the lunch after the meeting to-morrow night," said Mike, looking out of the window with a faraway look in his eyes.

"Wait here," said Mr. Hopkins.

"Yessir," said Mike.

Through the rain Mr. Hopkins went back into his library. He shut the door behind him, locked it, and pulled down the works of Balzac again.

well you are received to-night you will want to deliver a lecture at every meeting."

"If I exhibit symptoms like that," said Mr. Hopkins, "it will be no trouble to break my will."

He helped Mrs. Hopkins receive the members when they came. Pillsbury and Haines were among the last to arrive.

Mr. Hopkins took them to the sideboard.

"What excuse are you going to offer?" asked Pillsbury.

"What do you mean?" Mr. Hopkins asked with dignity.

Next Week, Talbot Smith AND THE Servant Problem

By  
ARTHUR E. MCFARLANE